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Alcimededes

In years gone by, we were all allowed to be different. Now, it seems that anyone whose behaviour or lifestyle is slightly off the norm must be awarded a medical diagnosis. Human variation is no longer permissible. Non-conformity is not an option. The bureau of statistics will not tolerate such insolence. In this medicalised world, the child with temper tantrums and the overweight adult are now recognised in the recently-published Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (DSM-5)¹ as casualties of medical conditions, rather than victims of their own choices. Mr Orwell will be looking on with interest, beaming a rather cynical smile at even the slightest thought of individuality or personal responsibility.

"Affluenza" is another case in point. Having a privileged upbringing which gives the individual a sense of grandiosity and entitlement can ultimately lead to irresponsible behaviour and lack of respect for authority, such as drink driving. This has been highlighted recently in Texas where 16 year old Ethan Couch stole a car belonging to his father's company and, whilst he was three times the drink-drive limit, mowed down four pedestrians.²

However, it would appear that the real victims in this tragedy weren't the four corpses lying at the side of the road, or their families who had to scrape the remains from the tarmac, or even the family of his passenger who was left brain-damaged. The *real* victim was the young driver who had suffered a lifetime of affluenza at the hands of his wealthy parents. Or so his defence team and psychologist successfully argued. The *real* victim was therefore given a therapy programme and ten years probation to deal with his demons of privilege, much to the outrage of any onlookers with common sense and common values.

The American Psychological Association has been quick to distance itself from such a woolly diagnosis, but it could be argued that precedent has been set. The die has been cast. Affluenza is believed to be contagious and could be coming to a Court near you sometime soon.

On the subject of drink drivers, it appears that most British drivers are unaware of their alcohol levels "the morning after the night before." A recent survey by ICM Research, commissioned by a UK insurance company, revealed that 46% of drivers had no idea as to how quickly units of alcohol are metabolised, what factors can affect the metabolism, and how many units they had consumed the previous night.³ When projected across the country, this study suggested that over one million people in England and Wales had driven under the influence of alcohol in the past two years, without realising their folly. Averaged out, the researchers claim that drivers required an extra 5 hours before getting behind the wheel of their car to ensure that they were below the drink-driving limit.

Meanwhile, down the local watering hole, drinkers are being offered money to report drink drivers to the authorities and are

being paid up to £1000 for their trouble. The scheme is being conducted in Derbyshire and the West Midlands over the Christmas/New Year 2013 periods, in tandem with Crimestoppers.⁴ The amount awarded will depend upon the seriousness of the crime. Alcimededes awaits with interest the result of this scheme, and whether there is a pandemic of affluenza in the Midlands.

Your starter for ten: what do the following have in common?

- Ernesto "Che" Guevara
- President Bashar al-Assad of Syria
- The leader of Al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri,
- Former Bosnian Serb leader, President Radovan Karadžić
- Josef Mengele

Answer? They all have medical degrees, but somehow forgot the bit about "doing no harm." Indeed, the track record of some of these characters would leave our very own Harold Shipman red-faced in the starting blocks. Even the highly-photogenic Che, who adorns the walls and T-shirts of countless students across the globe, is believed to have personally overseen the killing of several hundred people who disagreed with his Marxist ideals.

One would hope that this is just a tiny basket of bad medical apples whose Scrumpy would be hard to swallow. Merely a sad group of individuals who just happen to possess a medical degree, and don't realise that bumping off the punters is not a routine part of clinical practice. However, it now seems that the UK Government is happy to assume that doctors (and nurses) are potential murderers until proven otherwise.

In the wake of the Francis Report into failings at the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Trust and the subsequent Berwick Report into patient safety, the UK Government announced in Nov 2013 that a new crime of wilful neglect of patients will be incorporated into the Mental Capacity Act. The appropriateness of the sentencing will be decided in the coming months following consultation.⁵

Whether this is merely political smoke-screening to divert NHS failings onto doctors and nurses is arguable. Whether new legislation is actually required is also questionable. No doctor or nurse should try to defend a colleague who is negligent: defending the indefensible is the domain of unscrupulous defence lawyers keen to make a quick buck. However, the days of accepted complications for patients seem to be numbered, even if the patient has given fully informed consent to the procedure.

We also have to admit the simple but harsh reality that even the best-intentioned clinician will make mistakes from time to time. Difficulties arising from clinical care will surely find someone to blame, especially with no-win-no-fee medical litigation lawyers lying in wait with their shoddy medical dictionaries opened at page one on "affluenza."

Figures surrounding rape and allegations of sexual assault are always controversial and understandably emotive. Recent statistics suggest that referral rates to the Crown Prosecution Service for sexual offences has reached a five-year low,^{6,7} with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) expressing concern about this finding.

Of the approximately 17,000 cases of sexual assault and rape reported to the police in 2012–2013, 5404 were forwarded to the CPS for consideration. This compares with 6597 cases that had been forwarded to the CPS in 2008–2009, out of 13,096 cases being referred to the police, i.e. despite the numbers of rape cases being reported to the police having gone up by approximately 30%, the referral rate to the CPS is currently only 31%. This compares with a referral rate to CPS of 50.3% in 2008/9. However, conviction rates for 2012–2013 for cases that proceeded to Court were 63%.

As an aside, the UK Home Office has also announced that “Clare’s Law”, which allows individuals to check the police records of their partners, is to be extended across the whole of England and Wales from March 2014.⁸ This follows on from a successful pilot scheme in Wiltshire, Greater Manchester, Nottinghamshire and Gwent since 2012, which it is claimed has helped over 100 people avoid potentially violent relationships. The law is named after Clare Wood, who was murdered in Salford in February 2009 by her violent ex-boyfriend, and who had been unaware of his history of violence against women.

Uruguay has taken the lead in the World Drugs Championships by becoming the first country to fully legalise the growth and sale of cannabis. After April 2014, over – 18s will be allowed to buy up to 40 g per month.⁹ Whether the notoriously liberal Netherlands will rise to this challenge and legalise other currently-illicit drugs remains to be seen. A photo-finish may be on the cards.

It’s probably fair to say that the UK is unlikely to be anywhere in the running as the government has just announced a review of “legal highs” with results to be published in the spring of 2014.¹⁰ It is expected that there will be a tightening of legislation, including NBOMe (“N-Bomb”) becoming a Class A substance and BenzoFury becoming Class B.

At what point did human beings appear on the world stage? If Darwin’s ideas and subsequent findings are reliable, it is naïve to

think that a single pair of *Homo sapiens* suddenly appeared in a single cave at a single point in time, and the question is therefore probably unanswerable with any degree of accuracy. It is far more likely that modern humans evolved over numerous generations from earlier *Homo* species, but the timescales involved in this evolutionary jigsaw seem to vary with new discoveries.

A recent study in the renowned journal *Nature* has reported the results of mitochondrial DNA analysis from a femur found in the “Pit of Bones” archaeological site (“Sima de los Huesos”) in the Atapuerca Mountains, Spain.¹¹ The femur dates back 400,000 years. The previous record of DNA isolation from *Homo sapiens* was from a whippersnapper of a bone that was merely 350,000 years old. It is unclear what caused its owner’s death, but affluenza has not been excluded.

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